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Converting the Landscape:  
Changes to the Land in Moravian Labrador

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Introduction

On July 31st, 1752, the British ship "Hope" anchored in a good, well-wooded bay along the Labrador coast, a bay which the crew christened Nisbet's Harbour, most likely north of present day Hopedale. There, four missionaries belonging to the Moravian Church unloaded a prefabricated building they had brought from Europe, and prepared to establish the first Moravian church mission station in Labrador. The ship and crew left the missionaries one of their two small boats, and headed north. On September 13th, the ship encountered a group of Inuit who encouraged the crew to come ashore to trade (Peacock 1976, 6-7). The leader of the expedition, a missionary named John Christian Erhardt, along with the Hope's captain, and five crew members took the second boat and disappeared up a fjord, where, according to popular local legend, they were killed and eaten. The first mate of the Hope waited for several days, and when the missing men did not respond to his questioning gunfire, was forced to abandon the site. The Hope, seriously undermanned, sailed back to Nisbet's Harbour, where the four missionaries were pressed into service to aid in the return journey to London.

Despite the glorious failure of the first settlement, further missionaries attempted to set up

shop along the coast. The next four attempts to establish permanent stations also failed. Then,

The sixth time they came, in 1771, the first permanent mission was established at Nain. During the 1800's, the missionaries spread out along the northern coast to convert the Inuit into Christians. From Ramah to Makkovik, Moravian missions dotted three hundred miles of Labrador's northern coast ("Moravian Mission").

The changes the missionaries brought with them were dramatic. To the Inuit, the Moravians brought a new religion, and along with that, a new language, new thought patterns, and new ideas about settlement, industry, economy, and education. This paper looks at one specific aspect of change in Moravian Labrador, the changes to the land and to the visual landscape that the missionaries instigated, and what these changes reveal about the Moravians themselves. The paper works from the idea that three-dimensional space and cultural space are interwoven. Archaeologist Marianne Sawicki (13-14) argues that "because physical and social space are built and regulated together, the physical layout of a site can clue us in to the social thresholds and barriers that confronted its inhabitants".

### A Brief History of the Moravian Church

The Moravian Church, also known as the Church of the Brethren, or the Unitas Fratrum, is one of two pre-Reformation Protestant churches. It takes as its spiritual founder the Czech religious reformer Jan Hus, who was ordained as a Catholic priest, but was excommunicated in 1412 for speaking out against the practices of the Church (Schattschneider 18-20). Hus was burned at

the stake on 6 July 1415, and his death sparked the Hussite War, which would last for over sixteen years (Schattschneider 22-26). The fortunes of the Church rose and fell, experiencing periods of calm, followed by periods of intense persecution. In the 1620's, intense counterreformation Catholicism forced the Church underground, with most adherents fleeing to Poland to escape the persecution in Moravia and Bohemia (Hiller 2). The Moravians, as they became known, eventually found shelter in Germany in the early eighteenth century, under the patronage of Nicholas Ludwig, Count and Lord of Zinzendorf and Pottendorf (Hiller 3). Sandra Gillis writes,

It was Zinzendorf, the "ordinary" or head, of the Church after 1737 until his death in 1760, who imparted to the Brethren a "global view of Christianity". "The World is my parish", he asserted, and under his leadership the Brethren began aggressive missionary activity throughout the globe (Gillis 457).

The Moravian Church in Labrador grew out of missionary work in Greenland, where missionaries were first sent in 1733 (Schattschneider 71). Through their work in Greenland, the Moravian missionaries learned to speak and write Inuktitut, and started the work of translating the gospels. With a knowledge of the language with them, it was decided in 1752 to attempt missionary work in Labrador, and the first successful mission station was established in Nain in 1771. Many of the first missionaries at Nain were carpenters, blacksmiths, and builders (Moravian 17). The mission house, brought from England on the ship the Jersey Packet (Hiller 84) was erected in 1771. The mission house was "extended and improved", and a saw mill was constructed in 1772 (Hiller 90). This saw mill would be of great importance in later construction efforts along the coast. The



buildings at OKaK, for example, were prefabricated in Nain (Peacock 1976, 12). The large, European-style church and mission buildings in Nain were destroyed by fire in 1924 (Peacock 1983, 24).

Using Nain as a base, other mission stations were soon opened. The first mission building in Hopedale was constructed in 1782, and survives today as the oldest timber frame building in Canada, east of Quebec ("Hopedale" 18). In 1804, the first school at Hopedale was established (Peacock 1976, 12), and the construction of the present church and mission house took place between 1850 and 1861 (Hale 444).

Mission work started at Hebron in 1818 (Peacock 1976, 12), although at that point it was known by its Inuit name of KangerdluksoaK (Peacock 1983, 25). The Moravians' first task, "was to gather the people in one place, so KangerdluksoaK became the permanent village, renamed Hebron. It was important to keep the Inuit close to the mission, which made it easier to preach the gospel and promote Christianity among the Inuit" ("Relocation"). In the winter of 1831, a "temporary building was prefabricated at the OKaK settlement and transported by dog team" to Hebron (Peacock 1983, 26). The large church building at Hebron was started at this time, but was not completed until 1838 (Peacock 1983, 26). The Hebron station remained open until 1959, when it was abandoned (Gillis 462).

### Changes to the Landscape

The Moravians were the first Europeans to settle in the area, and the first to construct large,

timber frame buildings. The Hudson's Bay Company did not move into northern coastal Labrador until the twentieth century, and European settlers moved into northern Labrador only after permanent Moravian settlements had been established. Before the Moravians, this part of Labrador had very little in the way of architecture. The Inuit had their own architectural designs, though these were relatively impermanent, due to their nomadic lifestyle. The semi-subterranean Inuit sod house is one of the more concrete examples of an indigenous style of building. While these structures were actually designed perfectly to reflex Inuit needs and environmental factors, European commentators found them cramped, crude, and thoroughly unpleasant.

Contrasted against these vernacular structures are the Moravian buildings; large, multi-storeyed, and carefully prefabricated to be transported and reassembled. The earlier Moravian buildings are remarkably conservative in form and style, and draw on 15th and 16th century mediaeval German and Czechoslovakian prototypes. They display distinctive steep gable roofs or truncated gable roofs, dormer windows, cupolas, linked buildings and symmetrical floor plans, as typified by the large mission complexes at Hebron and Hopedale. From a purely architectural perspective, the buildings are very complex. They are of a pegged mortise and tenon half-timber construction with brick nogging, and also with highly developed support systems. For example, in the two storey churches at Hebron and Hopedale, the entire second floor is hung in suspension from the roof timbers, creating an open first floor space with no columns or supports.

Imposed as they are on a landscape with little else in the way of architectural patterning, these structures clearly represent more than mere buildings. Architectural historian Johanna Lewis (127)



argues that the Moravians "had a utopian vision of a pure society, based on their religious and biblical beliefs, free of the evil found in the outside world". Moravian settlements were communitarian, with all individuals living, working, and worshipping together as a group. Every aspect of Moravian daily life was rigorously planned, and the day was ordered into blocks of time with specific tasks to be performed in each block, not unlike the systems developed for use in monastic communities during the Middle Ages.

Frederic William Marshall, the administrator of the Moravian community of Salem, North Carolina, wrote in 1772 that Salem "should become an entire land in which people who belonged to the Brethren lived" (in Lewis 127). Architecture played a part in this, but the sense of order that was needed could not be created by buildings alone. The ideal Moravian community existed in its own landscape. William Murtagh (9) writes that Moravians "warrant interest, not only for the buildings they erected, but also for their conscious concern for the total visual and functional environment of their communities". Every Moravian settlement ideally represented "an entire land", separate from the outside world environmentally as well as spiritually. The creation of immediately distinct boundaries, controlled entranceways like the church gate at Hopedale, and elevated vantage points emphasized the community's territory as a symbolic whole, distinct from the territory which surrounded it.

Harry Symons (ix) wrote, "the fence is inseparable from the history of men". The fence, certainly, is inseparable from the history of Moravian settlement in Labrador. The first Mission building at Nain, built in 1771, was surrounded by a wooden palisade (Hiller 86). While this may

have been a response to the initial hostility of the Inuit, the palisade also served to mark the Moravian's territory as ideologically distinct, and to illustrate the boundary between the ideal Moravian socialist utopia, and the heathen world of the Labrador Inuit with all its pagan evils.

In the Moravian settlements much further south, such as the settlement at Schoenbrunn, Ohio, founded in 1772, fences served to keep cattle out of residential areas (Marsik 52). In Labrador, where there was no cattle, fences erected around garden areas served possibly in part to protect crops from caribou, but they also stood as the dividing line between ordered cultural space and space that was still part of the wild. Garden space in Labrador can be divided into two categories, produce or vegetable gardens, and pleasure gardens.

Throughout the early eighteenth century, pleasure gardens came into vogue, an institution fed by a proliferation of popular books on the subject. With the Georgian style of architecture and its strict attention to symmetry came matching planned gardens, "laid out on a central axis and composed of simple geometric arrangements of planting beds and walkways" (O'Day 26). Moravian communities of this time period were as much a part of this movement as secular communities, and missionaries planned and planted rigorously formal rectilinear pleasure gardens in Labrador. One of the first tasks the missionaries at Hebron undertook, even before the main mission house was completed, was the construction of a pleasure garden. The late Rev. F.W. Peacock (1983, 26), former superintendent of the Moravian Church in Labrador, wrote, "on that barren land they laid out a garden, which they called Elim, in which they could sit and enjoy their pipes". The remains of this garden can still be seen at Hebron today, although the fence which once surrounded it has been



removed. Moravian formal gardens in Labrador were copies of formal gardens in Herrnhut and Nisky, in Germany, and were mirrored by similar gardens in communities like Nazareth, in Pennsylvania. The garden at Nisky, Germany followed a typical eighteenth century scheme, "with a formal area and an asymmetrical section in the other portion of an informal, romantic character" (Murtagh 10). This garden, named "Mon Plasir", and another, even more formal garden also at Nisky named "Astrazen" were designed primarily as "promenading spots" for men and boys (Murtagh 10-11).

Existing separate from the formal pleasure gardens were vegetable gardens. In 1864, entomologist and zoologist Alpheus Packard, travelling along the Labrador coast, was impressed by "Hopedale's protected gardens" which featured rhubarb, potatoes, cabbages and turnips, as well as a large greenhouse for tomatoes, lettuce and flowers (Pringle 191). Some missionaries, like Walter Perrett, had special talents for raising plants in unlikely habitats (Pringle 212). Sidney Dicker, who was born in OKaK after the Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918-1919, remembers the Mission garden in Nain:

There was quite a little garden there. It had a little blue house in the middle where they used to keep their rakes and shovels and wheelbarrows for looking after their vegetables, like they grewed chives they used to call it. Like grass but it was onion tasting, you know. And rhubarbs. This what we've got outside the house came from the minister... these blue flowers came from the mission house, after they got them from Siegfried Hettasch.

Considerable work went into the creation of these gardens. Sidney Dicker remembers, "the OKaK missionaries had their rhubarb, lots of it". But rhubarb and other introduced species did not

initially grow well in Labrador, as the local soil was less than fertile. The missionaries circumvented this problem in some locations by importing soil from England for use in the gardens. Mission ships bringing supplies from Europe would bring topsoil as ballast, and unload their cargo of earth once they reached Labrador communities such as Nain.

Where the landscape didn't suit the needs of the missionaries, it was altered, reordered until it did so. Streams, such as the ones which flowed near OKaK, were redirected in stone channels to provide water to power sawmills or for drinking. Complex drainage and irrigation ditches were also dug, to provide water for various gardens.

One of the more impressive Labrador examples of landscape architecture is the missionary graveyard at Hebron. Located north of the community, the graveyard is an elevated plateau measuring roughly 45 meters by 30 meters, and is perfectly rectangular. The plateau is level, and accessible by a stone and earth ramp on its south-east corner. If one uses a conservative height estimate of 3 meters on average over the entire structure, the missionary families must have moved, by hand, approximately 4050 cubic meters of earth to create a suitable landscape for their dead.

This graveyard, like the missionary graveyard at Hopedale, is aligned on a north-south axis. The fence-line which surrounds the Hopedale graveyard, despite a two-hundred year succession of repairs and replacements, is still only 2 degrees off magnetic north.

Moravian graveyards, like gardens, were also named, and given titles like "God's Acre". Created or modified aspects of the landscape, like gardens, graveyards, buildings, and settlements, were all given religious or inspirational names. Hebron, for example means "friendship" in Hebrew,



and is a place name mentioned frequently in the Old Testament. The station originally known by the Inuit name of Avertok (Dalibard et al. 4), was renamed Hoffenthal, The Valley of Hope, today's Hopedale. Unmodified aspects of the landscape were also named in a similar fashion. Hills, bays, and promontories were given religious names, incorporating aspects of the landscape which could not be otherwise by tamed into the "entire land in which people who belonged to the Brethren lived" (in Lewis 127). The imposing black granite cliffs which overshadow Nain, for example, were christened "Sophia", after the wife of an early missionary.

Connecting the various aspects of the Moravian landscape were elevated pathways, level walkways constructed of cut stone and earth. These pathways cut across marshy areas, and small footbridges were constructed over streams where necessary. Closer to the mission buildings, walkways were paved with imported brick, sometimes in a herringbone pattern. Few of these remain. Brick, historically a scarce commodity in both Labrador and Newfoundland, was scavenged and reused by settlers wherever possible. Following the closure of the Zoar mission station in 1895, the remaining bricks were removed from the site, and incorporated into chimneys and pathways elsewhere along the coast.

## Conclusions

Moravian missionaries in Labrador attempted to replicate the order of their home settlements in Eastern Europe, and to create pockets of utopia in the midst of an unfamiliar and harsh landscape. They built elaborate and complex structures evocative of their homeland, and did their best to create

an ordered and understandable cultural geography. Where the land could not be physically modified or partitioned off, it was claimed with names taken from the missionaries' theological and cultural backgrounds, and the unknown was brought into the realm of the known.

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